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EX-CIA CHIEF SAYS IRAN LITTLE THREAT TO US NAVY IN GULF  
WASHINGTON

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Richard Helms, a former CIA director and U.S. ambassador to Iran, said on Thursday Iran's military represented no real threat to U.S. naval forces on escort duty in the Gulf.

"I don't regard us as sitting ducks at all," Helms said in a U.S. television interview.

"The Iranians have a very small air force now -- 20, 25 planes. Their navy has never amounted to anything anyway.

"And what they're using in their attacks on these tankers are speedboats with rocket launchers and machineguns aboard," Helms said in reference to the so-called "tanker war" in which Iran and Iraq have been attacking ships carrying each other's oil and supplies as part of their seven-year war.

Helms said Iran's forces in any case were no match for the American warships escorting U.S.-flagged tankers from Kuwait, which Iran regards as an Iraqi ally.

"So I don't think that they're a threat at all, and I think there's a tendency to exaggerate the so-called 'conflagration' in the Persian Gulf," he said.

Helms, who was U.S. ambassador to Iran from 1973-76 after heading the Central Intelligence Agency for several years, also said he doubted Iran would accept diplomatic mediation of the Gulf war.

"If they do I'll be very surprised," he said. "... The Ayatollah (Ruhollah) Khomeini believed that he got the shah, believed that he got Jimmy Carter and has vowed to get (President) Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

"He still doesn't have Saddam Hussein of Iraq's head on a platter and so I don't think that he's going to stop the war."

Khomeini is spiritual leader of the Muslim revolutionary forces that overthrew the shah and also helped bring about former President Carter's downfall by holding 52 Americans hostage in Tehran from 1979-81.